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ABSTRACT

Presently, reading is much discussed by senators, representatives, and state legislatures--the debate is on the following issues in reading instruction: (1) having all students in public school achieve at grade level as a reading minimum; (2) accountability of teachers for student achievement; (3) teachers having high achievement expectations from each student; (4) teacher testing to demonstrate teaching skills/abilities; and (5) educational bankruptcy laws and vouchers for schools whose students do poorly on tests. What is minimized or avoided in the discussion is what legislative bodies can do, such as provide moneys for constructing school buildings, give verbal and moral support to the public schools, and offer adequate salaries to teachers. An issue that has been with reading specialists for some time is the whole language versus phonics debate. Recommended is the following in phonics instruction: use phonics instruction as needed to assist a student to identify the unknown word; use a more systematic approach if a learner can benefit from phonics to recognize unknown words; use phonics in an informal way to make these learnings enjoyable; use phonics as a functional approach in recognizing unknown words and not phonics for its own sake; and use work book pages in phonics if they serve a useful purpose. Another question arises as to who should sequence student learning in the reading curriculum. These and other issues, such as technology use in reading instruction, need to be discussed with an attempt made at achieving synthesis. (NKA)

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Issues in Reading Instruction.

by Marlow Ediger

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ISSUES IN READING INSTRUCTION

Issues in reading have been in evidence since the beginning of the thirteen colonies. It is only normal to face issues since change will come about with people in society debating the merits of many items,including the reading curriculum. Presently in political news, reading is discussed much by senators, representatives, and the president of the United States in terms of students needing to achieve at a higher level. These same debates are also occurring at the state legislative offices including the governor. Presently, the debate is on the following issues in reading instruction:

1. having all students in the public schools achieve at grade level as a minimum in reading.
2. accountability of teachers for student achievement.
3. teachers having high achievement expectations from each student.
4. teacher testing to demonstrate teaching skills and abilities.
5. educational bankruptcy laws and vouchers for schools whose students do poorly on test results.

Very little is mentioned about holding others accountable for student achievement. Thus, the following are minimized or avoided as to what legislative bodies can do on the state and federal levels of government:

1. provide moneys for constructing school buildings. For example, the Los Angeles School district (Education Week, September 13, 2000) is concerned about space for students. "The overcrowding is very disruptive and gets in the way of good instruction. I don't know if there has been a steeper decline in facilities in America. There has been a neglect in space.
2. provide verbal and moral support for the public schools. Teachers work under very difficult situations in too many cases. Education Week (September 6, 2000) contained the following pertaining to computer glitches in scoring Minnesota students' tests:

Forty one school system's guidance counselors met one-on-one last month with the 538 students who were mistakenly given failing grades, to help seniors and 11th graders straighten out their post graduate plans, and to help younger students switch around this year's course selections.

As hard as it was to tell 16 seniors that the system had deprived them of diplomas they had earned, lead counselor Philip V. Cognetta said the worst was yet to come for students who were already struggling in school.

"I know of kids who were told they failed, and their grades just took a nose dive," Mr. Cognetta said. "What many of these students didn't

need is another blow to their egos -- and this was a false blow."

3. provide adequate salaries to teachers. Teacher's salaries are very low. They are inadequate to live on. A minimum BSE degree is required for teaching which means that four years of undergraduate education has to be paid for in one way or another. A lot of money, effort, and time go into receiving the BSE degree. Money could have been earned in the meantime. Approximately $30,000 average salary for teachers is very low as compared to what other professionals receive in the nation. In Missouri, the beginning teacher's salary is $18,000 per school year. With many women teaching, their salary supplements that of the spouse.

When the above three items are given careful consideration and remedied, reading teachers should be able to improve the quality of instruction. Thus, reading teachers need adequate space for teaching, recognition for work accomplished in helping students to improve reading skills, and receive adequate remuneration so that there is no need to word about financial matters, but time/effort may rather be spent on selecting the best objectives possible for each reader, suitable learning opportunities to provide for individual differences in reading achievement, and assessment procedures so that feedback may be given to learners on improving skills in reading.

Whole Language vs Phonics Instruction

This issue has been with reading specialists for some time. Advocates of whole language instruction use the following to bolster their point of view:

1. students read meaningful content rather than analyze words which may have no meaning for the reader.
2. students attach interest to what is being read in a story rather than being drilled on phonics and syllabication skills.
3. students learn to recognize words in context, not in isolation.
4. students receive reinforcement in word recognition through rereading and echoic reading of previously read content.
5. students observe the teacher reading aloud, followed by cooperative reading with the teacher, and then reread the same subject matter, such as in using the Big Book in reading instruction.

Whole language approaches in teaching reading stress using the interests of young readers to motivate instruction. This is quite in evidence in individualized reading whereby the student selects, from among others, a library book to read. After having completed reading the library book, the reader has a conference with the teacher to assess comprehension and oral reading. The teacher records vital information

from the conference and uses it for the next sequential conference to assist achievement (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Eleven).

Phonics advocates believe that students need tools in learning to recognize unknown words. Thus, an initial consonant in an unknown word, if known by the student may provide the key for word identification. Or, dividing an unknown word into syllables may then assist the reader to identify that word. In supervising student teachers in the public schools for thirty years, the author has noticed many learners using phonics and syllabication to unlock the unknown word. Should systemic phonics be taught or should phonics be taught when the need arises? Both procedures may be used. Students are individuals and even if a research study states that those involved in the research did better at the .01 level in method "X," there are still students who did better with the other approach in reading instruction. This can be checked out by looking at test results for each reader in the study. Phonics advocates would state the following reasons for using their approach in reading instruction:

1. it can be a key to recognizing unknown words.
2. it provides security to learners in becoming independent in word identification.
3. it can be used along with whole word methods in reading instruction.
4. it can be made interesting to readers and not be dull and boring through drill and more drill in phonics.
5. it will not be a 100% consistent way to identify unknown words due to irregularities in spelling of English words, but there is adequate consistency to warrant their attention in reading instruction (Ediger, 2000, Chapter 18)..

The author recommends the following in phonics instruction:

1. use phonics instruction as <u>needed</u> to assist a student to identify the unknown word.
2. use a more systematic approach if a learner can benefit from phonics to recognize unknown words.
3. use phonics in an informal way to make these learnings enjoyable. For example, the experience chart, also a whole language approach in the teaching of reading, may provides a game approach whereby students may be asked to give orally all words that start with the letter "s," or locate all words in the experience chart that end with the letter "t." Readers of the experience chart may also provide aloud words that rhyme. Phonics need not interfere with reading for meaning and understanding, but can facilitate skills with word play activities from a whole language approach in the teaching of reading.
4. use phonics as a functional approach in recognizing unknown words and not phonics for its own sake. The author has noticed

numerous times in classrooms where phonics was taught for the sake of learning phonics for its own sake. Thus, learners in numerous cases were reading well, but "they needed more phonics."

5. use work book pages in phonics if they serve a useful purpose. The purpose is to guide students to become independent in word recognition (Ediger, 2000, 210-211).

Sequencing Student Learning in Reading

The question arises as to who should sequence student learning in the reading curriculum. For example, in a carefully chosen basal reader, the teacher selects what is to be read by readers. A logical sequence is then in evidence. Thus the teacher orders or sequences what comes first, second, third, and so forth in reading activities. The teacher may follow the manual in selecting learning activities for students. Or the teacher may, in part or in whole, choose other learning activities to assist students to understand subject matter read. Basals may be used by the teacher in a very flexible manner. Creativity is important in adapting any method of instruction to guide optimal learner achievement. The teacher may also use library books and supplementary readers to assist students to become capable readers. Basals may be changed when the next adoption period comes up for choosing a new series of readers for students.The use of a single series need not be carved in stone for reading instruction. When the teacher makes selections and choices for students in reading instruction, a logical approach in teaching is being used.

Toward the other end of the continuum, a psychological procedure may be in evidence. Here, the learner is heavily involved in choosing what to read. A personalized reading program with an adequate number of library books at different reading centers may well provide students individually the opportunity to make choices and decisions. Thus, the learner chooses the center to work at with tasks to complete.The following might well illustrate some possibilities with one of the following labels at each center:

1. animal stories involving the farm, the zoo, and the circus.
2. expository library books pertaining to biographies, science topics, mathematics, and historical/geographical titles.
3. adventure, humor, and mystery stories.
4. novels in actual or simplified form.
5. science and historical fiction.
6. narrative writings as well as creative content in library books (See Ediger, 2000, 131-135).

Additional titles may be included pertaining to other classifications/genres of library books. At each entitled center, four or

five tasks may be listed on a card for learners to complete. For example on Table #1 above pertaining to animal stories, the following tasks may be written for a student to make selections from after reading the book of his/her choice:

a) draw a series of three pictures to show what you learned.

b) develop a mural by yourself or with one or two other learners who have read the same book.

c) write a summary of main ideas read.

d) pantomime what you have read to the teacher or two other students.

e) write a poem and set the words to music, if you wish, of content read (See Ediger, 2000, 29-34).

The listed tasks on cards might well follow The Theory of Multiple Intelligences as identified by Howard Gardner (1993) which are the following with the author providing a few examples applied to reporting on library books read:

1. visual/spatial -- art products and processes
2. logical/mathematical -- emphasizes thinking critically and logically in a discussion.
3. verbal/linguistic -- writing activities or taking paper/pencil tests.
4. musical/rhythmic -- writing lyrics such as in a poem and setting the words to music.
5. intrapersonal -- doing individual endeavors to show achievement.
6. interpersonal -- working on a group project to indicate learnings obtained.
7. bodily/kinesthetic -- use of the fine/gross muscles in physical movement to show achievement from reading a book.
8. science and scientific -- using objective thinking to indicate content acquired from reading (See Gardner, 1993).

By using the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, students individually may use a variety of procedures to reveal what has been accomplished as a result of having read a library book. Thus, the learner has chances to use his/her personal strengths and talents in revealing what has been achieved from reading a library book in personalized reading.

Conclusion

In addition to debates in society on needs in education, particularly reading achievement of students, the needs of teachers were also discussed. This was followed by discussing the issues of

1. whole language versus phonics instruction.
2. sequencing student learning in reading instruction.

These and other issues, such as technology use in reading instruction, need to be discussed with an attempt made at achieving synthesis. When discussing issues, there are selected guidelines that need to be followed in order to obtain the best ideas possible in reading instruction. These include the following:

1. each participant in the discussion group needs to be valued and accepted.
2. ideas for discussion should flow freely among committee members.
3. politeness and consideration for the thinking of others is needed.
4. rudeness, put downs, abruptness, interrupting others, and unkind remarks should be completely eliminated.
5. critical thought and problem solving should be important facets of committee endeavors (Ediger, 2000, 20-29).

The above processes need to be followed if issues in the reading curriculum are to be synthesized. But, this will take time and effort. Perhaps, both sides of the coin in the issues discussed may be inherent in teaching and learning situations in good reading instruction (Ediger, 2000, 16-19).

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